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OFFICE OF PETITIONS

In re Patent No. 6,463,640	:	
Issue Date: October 15, 2002	:	DECISION ON PETITION
Application No. 09/483,145	:	
Filed: January 13, 2000	:	
Attorney Docket No. ATOMIC-10	:	

This is a decision in response to the petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b), filed January 3, 2011, to accept the delayed payment of the maintenance fee for the above-identified patent.

The petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b) is **dismissed** without prejudice to reconsideration.

If reconsideration of this decision is desired, a petition for reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(e) must be filed within TWO (2) MONTHS from the mail date of this decision. No extension of this two-month time limit can be granted under 37 CFR 1.136(a) or (b). Any such petition for reconsideration must be accompanied by the petition fee of \$400.00 as set forth in 37 CFR 1.17(f). The petition for reconsideration should include an exhaustive attempt to provide the lacking item(s) noted below because the Director will not undertake any further reconsideration or review of the matter after a decision on the petition for reconsideration.

The patent issued on October 15, 2002. The first maintenance fee could have been paid during the period from Monday, October 17, 2005 through Monday, April 17, 2006, or with a surcharge during the period from Tuesday, April 18, 2006 through Monday, October 16, 2006. Accordingly, this patent expired on October 16, 2006, for failure to timely remit the first maintenance fee.

A grantable petition to accept a delayed maintenance fee payment under 37 CFR 1.378(b) must include the following:

- (1) the required maintenance fee set forth in § 1.20(e) through (g);

(2) the surcharge set forth in § 1.20(i)(1); and

(3) a showing that the delay was unavoidable since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent. The showing must enumerate the steps taken to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, the date and the manner in which patentee became aware of the expiration of the patent, and the steps taken to file the petition promptly.

This petition lacks requirement (3).

As 35 U.S.C. 41(c) requires the payment of fees at specified intervals to maintain a patent in force, rather than some response to a specific action by the Office under 35 U.S.C. 133, a reasonably prudent person in the exercise of due care and diligence would have taken steps to ensure the timely payment of such maintenance fees. Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 609, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1788 (Fed. Cir. 1995).

That is, an adequate showing that the delay in payment of the maintenance fee at issue was “unavoidable” within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) requires a showing of the steps taken to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fees for this patent. Id. Thus, where the record fails to disclose that the patentee took reasonable steps, or discloses that the patentee took no steps, to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, 35 U.S.C. 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) preclude acceptance of the delayed payment of the maintenance fee under 37 CFR 1.378(b).

Acceptance of a late maintenance fee under the unavoidable delay standard is considered under the same standard for reviving an abandoned application under 35 U.S.C. 133. This is a very stringent standard. Decisions on reviving abandoned applications on the basis of “unavoidable” delay have adopted the reasonably prudent person standard in determining if the delay was unavoidable:

The word ‘unavoidable’ . . . is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business. It permits them in the exercise of this care to rely upon the ordinary and trustworthy agencies of mail and telegraph, worthy and reliable employees, and such other means and instrumentalities as are usually employed in such important business. If unexpectedly, or through the unforeseen fault or imperfection of these agencies and instrumentalities, there occurs a failure, it may properly be said to be unavoidable, all other conditions of promptness in its rectification being present.

In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-15 (1912) (quoting Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (1887)); see also Winkler v. Ladd, 221 F. Supp. 550, 552, 138 USPQ 666, 667-68 (D.D.C. 1963), aff'd, 143 USPQ 172 (D.C. Cir. 1963); Ex parte Henrich, 1913 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 139, 141 (1913). In addition, decisions on revival are made on a “case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account.” Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). Finally, a petition cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of

establishing that the delay was “unavoidable.” Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 316-17, 5 USPQ2d 1130, 1131-32 (N.D. Ind. 1987). Moreover, patentee’s lack of knowledge of the need to pay the maintenance fee and the failure to receive the Maintenance Fee Reminder do not constitute unavoidable delay. See Patent No. 4,409,763, 7 USPQ2d 1798 (Comm’r Pat. 1988).

In determining whether the delay in paying a maintenance fee was unavoidable, one looks to whether the party responsible for payment of the maintenance fee exercised the due care of a reasonably prudent person. Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 608-609, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1787 (Fed. Cir. 1995). The patent owner at the time of the expiration of the patent is ultimately the person responsible to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fees. The patent owner may engage another to track and/or pay the maintenance fees; however, merely engaging another does not relieve the patent owner from his obligation to take appropriate steps to ensure the timely payment of such maintenance fees. See California Medical Prods. v. Tecnol Medical Prods., 921 F. Supp. 1219 (D. Del. 1995). Moreover, the USPTO must rely on the actions or inactions of duly authorized and voluntarily chosen representatives of an applicant, and an applicant is bound by the consequences of those actions or inactions. Link v. Wabash, 370 U.S. 626, 633-34 (1962); Huston v. Ladner, 973 F.2d 1564, 1567, 23 USPQ2d 1910, 1913 (Fed. Cir. 1992). Specifically, delay caused by the actions or inactions of a voluntarily chosen representative does not constitute unavoidable delay. Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 5 USPQ2d 1130 (D. Ind. 1987).

In the present petition, petitioner asserted that over a protracted period beginning in 2005, counsel’s office manager, Ms. Foreman, experienced a medical condition that caused her to fail in her office duties which included notifying the patentee of the need to pay the maintenance fees, obtaining the client’s authorization to pay the maintenance fee, and proceeding to send the payment to the USPTO. In support of the petition, petitioners provided a statement from patent practitioner Leonard Tachner, office manager Ms. Foreman, and Dr. Samuel A. Albert.

To establish a showing of “unavoidable” delay based upon medical incapacitation, petitioner must demonstrate that the incapacitation was of such a nature and degree as to render the person unable to conduct business (*e.g.*, correspond with the USPTO) during the period when the maintenance fee was due. Such a showing must be supported by a statement(s) from the person’s treating physician(s), and such statement(s) must provide the nature and degree of the person’s medical condition during the period from when the maintenance was due (*i.e.*, October 16, 2006) until the filing of a grantable petition. Namely, petitioner should provide the USPTO with a statement from a treating physician, asserting that from the time the maintenance fee was due (*i.e.*, October 16, 2006) until the filing of a grantable petition, the person’s medical condition was of such a degree of severity that it prevented her from timely paying the maintenance fee. Additionally, the treating physician must describe person’s medical condition, the degree of incapacitation, and the duration of the medical illness.

In this instance, petitioner has not provided sufficient evidence at this time to show that “but for” Ms. Foreman’s medical condition, the maintenance fee would have been timely paid. The Office is particularly interested in the duration of Ms. Foreman’s medical condition - the date of when Ms. Foreman’s medical condition began until the date she sought treatment. Petitioner may wish to

provide a statement from her treating physician. Additionally, petitioner should submit a statement from Ms. Foreman explaining in detail the exact actions or inactions she took with regard to the docketing and timely paying of the maintenance fees for this patent. The present statements submitted on petition provide the Office with generalities as to the actions/inactions of Ms. Foreman that ultimately resulted in the delayed payment of the maintenance fees.

In summary, petitioner must show that Ms. Foreman's medical condition was the cause of the error in failing to timely pay the maintenance fee; her condition was of such a degree of severity that it prevented her from performing specific duties with regard to the docketing and paying of the maintenance fee for this patent; and that her condition spanned the entire period from the due date for the maintenance fee until the date of the filing of a grantable petition. Without any further explanation or documentary evidence, the Office is left to speculate as to the circumstances that transpired.

The Office cautions petitioner to remove or mark through any personal information in any document submitted to the USPTO that could contribute to identity theft. Personal information such as social security numbers, bank account numbers, or credit card numbers (other than a check or credit card authorization form PTO-2038 submitted for payment purposes) is never required by the USPTO to support a petition or an application. If this type of personal information is included in documents submitted to the USPTO, petitioner should consider deleting such personal information from the documents before submitting them to the USPTO. Petitioner is advised that the patent file is available to the public after the issuance of a patent. However, checks and credit card authorization forms (PTO-2038) submitted for payment purposes are not retained in the application file, and therefore, are not publicly available.

For the reasons stated, the petition is **dismissed**.

Petitioner should note that if this petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b)/(e) is not renewed, or if renewed and not granted, petitioner may obtain a refund of the maintenance fee and post-expiration surcharge. The \$400.00 petition fee for seeking further reconsideration is not refundable.

Any request for refund should be in writing to the following address:

Mail Stop 16
Director of the US Patent and Trademark Office
PO Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

A copy of this decision should accompany petitioner's request.

The Office charged the deposit account for the \$490.00 maintenance fee due at 3.5 years, the \$1,240.00 maintenance fee due at 7.5 years, and the \$700.00 surcharge after expiration as authorized.

Further correspondence with respect to this matter should be addressed as follows:

By mail: Mail Stop Petition
 Commissioner for Patents
 P.O. Box 1450
 Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

By FAX: (571) 273-8300
 Attn: Office of Petitions

By hand: Customer Services Window
 Randolph Building
 401 Dulany Street
 Alexandria, VA 22314

Correspondence may also be submitted electronically via EFS-Web.

The patent file is being returned to Files Repository.

Telephone inquiries regarding this decision may be directed to the undersigned at (571) 272-3211.

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